

City News Service

SCAG Report

Study: Housing, Schools Struggle, but Air Quality, Employment Improving

Eds: Rob Gard, SCAG, can be reached at (323) 687-4998.

LOS ANGELES (CNS) - Southern Californians live in a congested region where buying a house is difficult and schools are struggling -- but safety, job creation and air quality are improving, according to a report out today.

The Southern California Association of Governments released its annual report on the quality of life in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, Imperial, San Bernardino and Ventura counties.

The region, which received a failing grade in mobility, is consistently one of the most congested in the nation, according to the report.

Population growth, a high dependency on cars and low levels of transit use contributed to persistently high levels of congestion, the report's authors said.

Drivers in Los Angeles and Orange counties experienced an average of 93 hours of delay in 2003 due to the congestion. Between 2003 and 2004, the average commute increased to 28.8 minutes, three minutes higher than the national average.

In housing and education, the SCAG report gave the region "D" grades.

On the housing front, 93,200 residential building permits were issued in 2004 -- an all-time high. The Inland Empire counties accounted for 56 percent of the permits issued.

Homeownership rates increased to 57 percent in 2004 but were significantly lower than the national average of 69 percent.

According to the report, the strong housing demand was a result of 40-year- low mortgage rates, an increase in the population and a wider availability of adjustable-rate and interest-only loans.

Less than one-fifth of the region's households can afford a median-priced home, according to the SCAG report.

"The extraordinary high housing-cost burdens not only impact the well-being of residents but also discourage business decisions to locate or expand in the region," the report states. "Lack of affordable housing remains a serious challenge to the region's long-term economic growth."

Southern Californians' schools continued to struggle with low test scores and high dropout rates in 2004.

That year, Los Angeles County had a 19 percent dropout rate, while in San Bernardino County, 17 percent of students dropped out of school.

Black and Hispanic high school students had significantly higher dropout rates than white and Asian students, the report found.

But life is not all bad in Southern California. Job creation, public safety and air quality have all improved, according to the SCAG report.

In 2004, the region had 1.3 percent job growth -- higher than the state and national averages.

Los Angeles County lost 44,000 jobs in 2003 but gained 9,000 in 2004 -- the first gains since 2001.

Jobs in the Inland Empire accounted for 55 percent of the total increase in the region.

“The Inland Empire continued to be the leading new-job generator in the region. Job increases in the Inland Empire were concentrated in construction, retail trade and professional and business services,” according to the report.

The average payroll per job in the region was \$43,190. However, the number of families living in poverty, 14.3 percent, was higher than the national average at 13.1 percent.

“In 2004, the region continued to have the highest poverty rate among the nine largest metropolitan regions in the nation,” according to the report.

Though air quality remained a concern for Southern California residents, some improvements were made in 2004.

“Partly due to cooler weather and weak atmospheric inversions, ozone pollution improved in all four air basins in the region, particularly for the South Coast Air Basin,” according to the report.

“In the most populous South Coast Air Basin, the number of days exceeding the federal one-hour ozone standard from 2003 to 2004 decreased from 68 days to 28 days, the lowest since 1976,” the report said.

That air basin includes Los Angeles and Orange counties.

Southern California has experienced a decrease in violent crime but a slight increase in juvenile offenses.

There were 105,861 violent crimes -- aggravated assault, robbery, forcible rape and homicide -- in 2004, a 10 percent decrease from the previous year.

Los Angeles County, however, experienced 75 percent of those violent crimes. Ventura and Orange counties consistently had the lowest rates of violent crime in the region, according to the SCAG report.

Juvenile felony offenses -- crimes that are punishable by death or imprisonment for those aged 10 to 17 -- increased by 2 percent.

Of the 27,912 juvenile felony arrests in 2004, 18 percent occurred in Ventura County and 9 percent in Los Angeles County.

Hate crimes continued to decline. The majority of hate crimes were racially motivated, followed by sexual orientation and religion, the report found.